

# Sweeping the Path

*"The Tao that can be stated, is not the eternal Tao;  
The name that can be named is not the eternal name.  
The unnamed is the origin of heaven and earth;  
The named is the mother of the myriad things.  
Therefore,  
Constantly having no desire in order to view its commencement;  
Constantly having desire in order to view its termination.  
These two have the same origin, but they differ in name;  
Both are called Mystery.  
Mystery after Mystery, is the gate to all wonders". - Tao Te Ching Chapter 1*

Work that I did in the 21st Century.

In the year 2000, the year of the long awaited millennium, I took a job in a bakery. I was 47. I started at six a.m. each morning and did a six day week.

The bakers needed constant supplies of clean racks and trays. I ran a machine which cleaned the trays. I ran another machine which washed the racks.

I aggregated heavy piles of metal trays which were heavy and difficult to move. By brute force I manhandled the piles of trays on little trollies across the bakery and up the ramp into the lift. Then I ran upstairs and removed the trays from the lift on the upper floor. Then I went downstairs to repeat the whole sequence of actions.

Some of the time I piled plastic trays to make a stack three metres high and put them into the large industrial washing machine. I usually had a long row of these three metre stacks waiting to go into the machine.

On weekdays there was no problem with this process but on Saturdays the boss would come in early and start the washing of the trays before I arrived. I dreaded Saturdays because the boss ignored all the safety warnings on the bottles of detergent and mixed them all together even though the labels specifically warned against mixing different ones. The various combinations of these detergents was liable to produce toxic fumes and traces of chlorine gas.

When I arrived at six a.m. I had to take over the process from the boss. I always got an extreme headache on a Saturday and it lasted throughout the weekend. Sundays were spent nursing my headache.

There was a baker called Brian. He used to take charge of cleaning the whole bakery area with a power hose at the end of Saturdays. He was a bully who shouted at everybody and threw his weight around to intimidate everyone. I talked about his bullying attitude to fellow workmates. I said I was going to get some leaflets about why bullying was unacceptable in the workplace and give them to Brian to read.

Someone ran and told Brian that I had said I was getting some leaflets to give to him. The next day Brian cornered me in the locker room and said he would beat the crap out of me if I gave him any leaflets. My response was my usual "Oh really, oh how fascinating" sort of line which I had been saying to bullies ever since childhood. It always seems to amuse them.

*"Everyone knows what beauty is;  
That is because there is ugliness;  
Everyone knows what goodness is;  
That is because there is evil.*

*Therefore,*

*Being and nothing give birth to one another,  
Hard and easy are mutually formed,  
Long and short shape each other,  
High and low complement each other,  
Music and voice are harmonized with each other,  
Front and back follow one another.*

*Hence,*

*The sage focuses on non-action in his works,  
Practices not-saying in his speech,  
The myriad things arise but are disregarded  
The sage produces but does not own  
Acts but does not claim  
Accomplishes work but does not take credit*

*Only because he does not take credit, and thus the credit does not go away." - Tao Te Ching*  
**Chapter 2**

In 2001, after about a year of working in the bakery I managed to find a different job, this time in a chemical warehouse. I was working for a cleaning contractor which had been hired by the manager of the warehouse. I had to collect unwanted boxes and packaging from all over the shop floor and load it all into a big industrial compressor which crushed it all into big heavy bundles. Then I would remove the bundle from the machine, tie string around it and take it on a hand-push pallet truck to the back door where it was stacked for regular removal and recycling.

The manager of the warehouse was another bully. He once spent several minutes shouting at me from point blank range, nearly nose to nose in a little tiny office room because I refused to clean up chemical spillages from the floor without adequate personal protective equipment such as a respirator mask. He was prepared to offer a disposable "dust mask" but not the correct respirator for chemical fumes and vapours.

In the end he had to get one of his own staff, as opposed to a sub-contractor like the company I worked for, to clean it up with no mask at all. I wouldn't do it. I had learned my lesson from the conditions at my previous job.

He blew another anger gasket shouting at me in March 2002 because I didn't stop emptying the bins when his warehouse staff were all being forced to stand still in silence for several minutes because of the death of the sodding Queen Mother. He wanted me to stand there in hypocritical pretence of respect for one of the bloody royals. Why would I, as a working class

person, have respect for the medieval mafia of the so-called “Windsor” family. The ruddy Saxe-Coburg-Gothas! I just went over to the other end of the warehouse and carried on with my work on that side.

In the warehouse people kept assuming that I would be an ignorant simpleton because I was doing a cleaning job. They continually expressed surprise that I spoke clearly, had a wide vocabulary and had even obtained a university degree. Yet I still worked in a humble job. They didn't understand me and it bothered them.

Shortly afterward, on my way to work in the morning, I was knocked off of my bicycle by a postal delivery van which suddenly pulled out of a side street without looking both ways. I had a broken leg and was taken to hospital where the bastards wanted to put pin in my leg! “No way,” I said, “I’ll have a proper plaster cast, if you don’t mind, and allow the leg to heal properly instead of walking around with a metal pin in my leg for the rest of my life setting off airport scanners!” They reluctantly agreed and I got an NHS plaster cast and a set of crutches on which I had to walk home from the hospital (2 kilometres!).

I got sickness benefit for eight weeks while leg healed. When I went back to work I was told that the cleaning company had failed to provide coverage during my absence and the warehouse had been eight weeks without a cleaner. Consequently the warehouse had contracted a different cleaning company and I was given notice of redundancy in early 2003.

*“Not to quest for the virtuous  
will keep the people from rivalry.  
Not to prize things that are hard to come by  
will keep the people from becoming thieves.  
Not to manifest desirables  
will make people’s sentiments undisturbed.  
So, in the sages’ peaceful and tranquil world,  
People’s minds are calmed,  
People’s stomachs are filled  
People’s aspirations are lowered,  
People’s physiques are strengthened;  
People are kept unknowing and undesiring,  
And even the knowing ones will never dare to act,  
Action without action.  
There is nothing left undone.” - Tao Te Ching Chapter 3*

Once again I had to look for a new job. I went for a cleaning vacancy at Sainsbury’s supermarket. I did that job for the next 5 years.

I had to work six days per week on a nightshift. I started at one a.m. each night and finished at nine a.m. The first six hours of the work each night was getting the store ready to open to the customers at seven o’clock and then there were another two hours of finishing off a few bits and pieces and maintaining the equipment.

My first priority each night was to get the instore bakery ready for the bakers who came in at four thirty.

The store was fairly large with a wide expanse of shop floor where shelf fillers did their jobs each night and managers strolled around overseeing. Every night a large muscular middle

aged African woman who was a shelf filler came into the bakery where I was cleaning and plugged in a radio playing a pop hits station. She turned it up to maximum volume so that it could be heard all the way across the shop floor. It was dreadful. The music itself wasn't too bad but the playlists were short, causing the same songs to come around too often, and every few minutes there were adverts for local businesses, usually John Holt Beds and Trago Mills. The volume necessary to be heard from so far away meant that I was being subjected to the blast of it at point blank range. Every time I turned it down a bit we had an argument. These arguments went on night after night.

The woman began a repeating pattern of coming into the bakery and standing over me when I was scrubbing the floor. She would look down at me and shout abuse. "You're nothing!" she shouted, "You're nobody! You're nothing! You're nobody! You're just a cleaner man! A stupid, stupid cleaner man!" All of this delivered in a West African accent from a large muscular aggressive woman. I got the impression that it wasn't just in defence of the radio music but also from a sense of outrage that a person with a university degree was scrubbing a floor. The impression I got from these nightly outbursts was that I was "wrong", "a freak", a nothing.

Of course I complained to the cleaning supervisor about the continual verbal abuse but he seemed to find it amusing and would do nothing.

As a solution to the radio problem I bought some batteries out of my own pocket and took the radio to the middle of the shop floor to let it play there on battery power so that it would be a considerable distance away from me.

The aggressive shelf filler woman brought it back to the bakery and plugged it in to mains power again. She refused to allow the problem to be solved. A solution would spoil her sadomasochistic fun each night.

Meanwhile there were other problems. I lived in a slum which didn't have hot and cold running water, just cold water, a kettle and a shower unit which was able to heat its own water. There was damp and black mould and a ticking sound in the wall which was very likely a death watch beetle. There was a neighbour upstairs who played loud banging electronic dance music and a neighbour next door who held religious meetings where everyone danced around chanting "Alelujah, alelujah!" I had to put on headphones to hear my television.

Very often, as I went out on my bicycle each night to get to work for a one a.m. start, I would be stopped by the police who thought that anyone going out on a bicycle after midnight was a burglary suspect.

Then the cleaning company started playing games of not always remembering to pay everyone. I had to phone up their head office to get everyone properly paid again. Then one night, after I had been there for five years, I was walking past the checkouts when I noticed that someone's bicycle had fallen down on the ground from where the owner had leaned it against the wall. I picked it up and gently leaned the bike back against the wall. 24 hours later I was being accused of doing the exact opposite of that. They said that I had

violently thrown the bicycle down on the ground for no reason. They said that there were "witnesses". They said.

So I was out of a job again. But this time it was a great relief to me!

*"The Tao is empty,  
But when using it, it is impossible to use it up.  
It is profound, seems like the root of the myriad things.  
Blunts its own sharpness.  
Unravels its own fetters.  
Harmonises its own light.  
Mixes with its own dust.  
It is unclear, but seems to have existed there.  
I do not know whose son it is,  
Maybe it was already created before the creator."* - **Tao Te Ching Chapter 4**

It was 2008 and I looked around for another job. I had always wanted to try being a road sweeper. The whole idea of street sweeping was so much in tune with Buddhism, Taoism, monasticism and the simple lifestyles which interested me. The Tao is the path. We need to sweep the path.

I applied for and got a job as a road sweeper working, not directly for Exeter City Council, but for an employment agency which provided the city council with extra sweepers.

I worked as a road sweeper for the next year and a half. I worked in blazing sunshine which burned the skin from my arms. I worked in freezing cold pouring rain which seeped through my yellow high visibility PVC rain protection suit and soaked though my other layers of clothing and ran down the back of my neck and all the way down inside my clothes. I worked in the autumn, picking up the fallen leaves. I worked in the winter, shovelling away the snow. I worked all the year round, picking up broken glass and dog's muck and litter from fast food restaurants. I worked an eight and a half hour day starting at seven a.m. I left the house at half past six each morning and cycled to the refuse collection centre on the industrial estate. I worked in all weathers and was out on route, doing an essential job for the city, for minimum wage, with no lunch facilities and no toilet facilities and even the yellow hi-vis PVC "waterproofs" that I wore were the ones which were cast off by the official road sweepers as "worn out and smelly" but which were considered to be "good enough" for agency workers.

I was happy.

I was happy because I didn't have to work on that bloody nightshift with that blaring pop music radio anymore. I was happy to be outdoors in the elements. I was happy to be doing a job which was unquestionably necessary to city life and was connected to recycling and environmentalism. I was happy because I didn't have to put up with various bullies who had shouted at me and verbally abused me and told lies about me in the previous three jobs. As a road sweeper people mostly ignored me and I was happy about that.

Nevertheless, I was still living in a slum and there were still the occasional idiots to spoil my day. These idiots often approached me when I was sitting on a bench eating my lunch and had headphones on listening to The Navy Lark or whatever on BBC Radio. Sometimes they wanted directions and sometimes it wasn't clear what they wanted. They all seemed blind to

the fact that I had headphones on and that I needed to remove them from my ears before I could hear what these idiots wanted.

A man in a motorised wheelchair deliberately ran over my foot and explained it by saying “Well, you didn’t get out of the way fast enough!”

There is a perception belonging to some of the people in motorised wheelchairs sometimes that, because they have been given the ability to move faster than pedestrians that they therefore have some sort of divine right to always do so. We mere mortals must jump aside for dear life.

Three things I remember which happened during 2009 over a period of a few short weeks: Firstly, walking through Exeter High Street on my way home from work I happened to look to my right in the direction of Cathedral Green and I saw a policeman and a traffic warden arresting a young man. The policemen left the man in the custody of the traffic warden and went off to do some unknown thing. Meanwhile the traffic warden held the man down on the ground and put his knee on the man’s head, pressing down hard. The arrested man was crying out in pain. Then the traffic warden happened to look up in my direction and noticed that I was standing still and intently watching what he was doing. He then relaxed his pressure and the arrested man appeared to be in less pain. I watched until the policeman returned and took the man away.

Secondly, a week or so later, again walking home from work, I saw another man being “arrested” by two young men who seemed to be employed by the shop called “GAME”. This was in the days when the “GAME” shop in Exeter was in the High Street, before it moved to the Guildhall. As before I decided to stand still and observe what was occurring, in case there might later be a call for witnesses. However, one of the two young men who making their “citizen’s arrest” noticed that I was standing still and observing. He came over and began shouting at me to “Go away! What are standing there for? Go away!” Then he hit me and knocked me down on the pavement.

He walked away and then, a moment later, came back and stood over me desperately shouting, “Get up! Get up!” He called me some names and continued shouting at me to get up. Then he walked away again, back to his colleague who was holding the “arrested suspect”.

A police vehicle arrived and a young uniformed constable spoke to the young man who had knocked me down. He took the arrested man into police custody. He looked in my direction, I was still laying on the ground. He said something to the man who had hit me. I couldn’t hear what they were saying but they both laughed about it and then the police officer drove away. He didn’t bother speaking to me. He appeared to have accepted whatever humorous explanation he’d been told by the attacker. They seemed to know each other, possibly from school since they were both about teens/twenties sort of age.

The man who had attacked me went back into the shop. I got up. A passer by told me that he had captured the entire incident on his phone and was going to put it up on YouTube. Thirdly, another week or two after that I was on my home from work again and was walking through the Belmont area of Exeter towards Clifton Hill when a young teenage boy came

running up behind me and started punching me in the back. I was walking along slowly, with my bicycle by my side and I was listening on headphones to a BBC radio play called "Bhowani Junction".

Before I could turn around to see my attacker a middle-aged man approached from in front of me and the two of them sandwiched me between them. The one behind me kept pushing me forward and the one in front of me kept pushing me backward. I shouted out to passers by "Help! Phone the police! Dial 999! Phone the police! Help! I'm being attacked!" People began phoning for the police.

While the man held onto me the boy started "frisking" me in an amateur "pretend police" sort of way. He was giggling like an excited girl. He also went through the contents of my back pack.

The attackers pushed me down on top of my bicycle. The middle-aged man leaned down towards me and growled "We are the police".

"I don't believe you" I said, "The police wouldn't just attack someone in the street for no reason and that one's only a teenage boy. If you're the police show me some identification." "Yes" said the middle aged man, as if he was happy to show me his I.D. However, instead of showing me his I.D. he did a little trick of putting his hand into his coat pocket, bringing the hand out again very quickly and waving the hand in front of me in a blur and then back into the pocket. The hand either held nothing at all, or an I.D. card or a bus ticket or anything at all. It was impossible to see anything other than a blur.

I asked if I could be allowed to actually see whether his hand held an I.D. of any sort at all and he replied "No. That's all you're getting".

So I still didn't believe that these two were connected to the police.

Then the actual genuine police began to arrive in a van. They had been summoned by the witnesses passing by with their mobile phones.

At the sight of the police van arriving the middle aged man went to his vehicle a got a set of handcuffs. He allowed the teenage boy to put the handcuffs onto me but failed to check whether they had been put on correctly. They were too loose. I instantly felt that could slide my hands out of them with very little difficulty. I nevertheless kept my hands in them simply because I didn't want to be accused of "escaping".

The boy looked nervously at the approaching uniformed police men and asked the man if he could go now. The man gave him permission and he ran off.

The uniform policemen came over from their van and one of them went through my back pack again. The back pack was still on my back so I couldn't actually see what they were doing. I speculated in my own mind as to whether they were putting things in or taking things out, or both.

One of the uniformed police asked, "Why did you run?"

I replied that I *didn't* run and that they had been lied to.

The officer told me that, apparently, I didn't have any I.D.

I replied that what he been told was a load of rubbish and that I certainly did have I.D. but that no-one had asked to see it.

The officer asked whether he could see my I.D.

“Of course,” I told him, “but I can’t get at it with the handcuffs on”.

He took out a key went to unlock the hand cuffs, letting out a gasp of astonishment when he saw that they were loose enough for me to remove them without unlocking.

Once the handcuffs were off I pulled down the yellow PVC hi-vis trousers, revealing my other council uniform road sweeper’s trousers underneath. I got my wallet out of my pocket and showed my identification. At the same time I explained my reluctance to believe that either the man who refused to show me his I.D. or his teenage accomplice were in any way connected to the police.

The uniformed policeman went over to the middle aged man and said something. The middle aged man showed his I.D. which was, apparently, acceptable.

The uniformed constable came back over and asked me how long I had been “on the dole”. I made it very clear to him that that was a false accusation, I wasn’t “on the dole” and that I was a council road sweeper in full time employment.

They had another little conference and then told me that I was free to go. It was a “case of mistaken identity” they told me. They didn’t say “sorry”.

I waited. They still didn’t say “sorry”.

I waited a bit longer.

Then I gave up, picked up my battered bicycle and continued my weary way home.

They were never going to say “sorry”.

After about a year and a half of working as a road sweeper I was told that there was no more work for me because I don’t drive a car. Apparently Exeter City Council had changed the rules regarding road sweepers and we now all had to be drivers. Since I was a mere “agency” worker I could be simply thrown away without any rights of job security.

*“The sky and the earth do not care,  
They regard the myriad things as straw dogs;  
The sage does not care,  
He regards people as straw dogs.  
The space between the sky and the earth, how much is it like large bellows!  
Empty but endless,  
Just move and wind will be produced;  
Much talk soon comes to nothing.  
It is better to be in between extremes.” - Tao Te Ching Chapter 5*

There then began the longest period of unemployment that I have ever suffered. It lasted nearly four years. During those four years employers seemed completely uninterested in me because I was an old man and, with a Fine Art degree, over-qualified for any of the available jobs.

However, after four years I managed to get some temporary work as a customer service advisor in a call centre (Worst job I ever had! Come gentle bombs and fall on Nashville, Tennessee, head office of Sitel.) and then some more temporary work as a labourer on a construction site.

Then I reached the age of sixty and working tax credits became available. This meant that I could now begin to apply for part time jobs and have working tax credits “top up” the amount to make a viable income.

I struggled through the next few years until I reached retirement age which, at that time, was 65.

*“The valley-spirit will not die, this is the primal mother.  
The gate of the primal mother is the root of the world.  
Her supplies were unending, exploitation of her shall never exhaust.” - Tao Te Ching  
Chapter 6*

Ah! Retirement! Best thing ever.

*“The heaven and the earth are eternal.  
The reason for the eternity of the heaven and the earth  
Is because they do not exist for themselves,  
therefore they are eternal.  
Because of this, The sages put their selves behind all other people,  
Yet it is before all others he shall eventually stand.  
They were indifferent to the discomforts and dangers.  
Yet it is he who shall thus survive.  
Isn't it because he is selfless,  
therefore he eventually achieves selfness”. - Tao Te Ching Chapter 7*